

★ **Axiomatic****Maria Tumarkin**

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Maria Tumarkin's *Axiomatic* focuses on events and people in Australia, and through that lens illuminates a wide spectrum of humanity.

Though categorized as a book of essays, “essay” doesn’t do justice to Tumarkin’s lengthy, probing, literary reports. It is made up of five forays into seldom-explored crevices of society, including teen suicide, the strange case of a grandmother’s abduction of her grandson, the footsteps of a community lawyer, the history and memory of personal trauma, and friendship. Tumarkin, who’s been described as a “cultural historian,” titles her pieces in a way that draws from that history in the form of axioms, including “You can’t enter the same river twice.”

The writing is dazzling without showboating. Tumarkin casts a critical eye on herself in a charming way, too. While her breadth of knowledge is impressive—the book is full of less-than-obvious, sometimes obscure, and always appropriate references—her work soars on the depth of her introspection, her interrogation, her tenacity, and her willingness to follow a story wherever it leads her. She has an instinct for capturing others’ telling quotes, and her own turns-of-phrase are also worthy of quotation. In one entry, a dead teenager’s friends keep calling and texting the girl’s smartphone “as if the phone were a portal, connecting them to the underworld,” and on sounding like our parents, Tumarkin writes, “we go from being inside them to them being inside us.” After describing people donating homemade food dishes after a death, she defines human life as “salad days at our peak, casserole days when it’s over.”

The reader’s equivalent of catching lightning in a bottle, *Axiomatic* showcases a brilliant and perceptive mind writing on a variety of subjects. Full of grace and insight, it is an exceptional book.

PETER DABBENE (September / October 2019)

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